Moral Panics and Urban Growth Machines: Official Reactions to Graffiti in New York City, 1990–2005

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Abstract This paper analyzes the official response to graffiti writing in New York City throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century. Drawing from a variety of documents, such as newspaper articles, political press releases, internal memos and government reports, I show that the city’s reaction to graffiti constitutes a moral panic and that the significance of this response can be discerned when interpreted in the context of theoretical insights developed by urban sociologists. On this basis, I argue that moral panics, or at least a subset of panics, may be central to negotiating the social conflict that accompanies the ways in which (urban) space will be put to use.

Keywords Moral panic · Graffiti · Growth machine · Privatism · Broken windows

Graffiti was ubiquitous on the city’s subway system throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1989, after several outbreaks of moral panic and costly efforts by several city agencies, the subway was officially declared “graffiti free” (Phase 2 and Schmidlapp 1996, p. 112). However, while the city was, and remains, preoccupied with keeping graffiti off the subway system, graffiti writers have simply redirected their energies and now write on buildings, alongside highways, on freight trains and on any other publicly visible surface within reach. Within a historical context marked by aggressive anti-graffiti rhetoric and attempts at removal, the city’s decision to follow graffiti writers “above ground” was far from surprising. Yet, despite the millions of dollars being spent each year,¹ the city’s more recent anti-graffiti efforts have not put an end to the “graffiti problem.”

¹Exact and comprehensive figures for the amount of money spent on anti-graffiti initiatives are difficult to ascertain. In New York City, approximately 20 city agencies currently play a role in combating graffiti, each performing specific tasks, and therefore spending different sums of money. Based on my documents, I would estimate that anti-graffiti initiatives cost the city approximately 5 to 10 million dollars a year.

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The ongoing “war” against graffiti, which is taking place in many parts of the city, has been legitimated by the emergence of a moral panic. In my view, this provides an occasion to extend our contemporary understanding of this important social phenomenon. In what follows, I attempt to outline the possibility of an urban view of moral panics by identifying the points of contact between the city’s response to graffiti and the concepts of privatism and growth machines. These two very closely related concepts have been of central importance to urban sociologists interested in discerning how space is ultimately put to use, and how urban areas develop their particular economic, social, and cultural contours. I conclude by suggesting that future research stands to benefit by acknowledging, at the theoretical level, that the social contradictions embedded in the production of urban space may constitute a distinct dimension that is necessary for understanding a variety of moral panics.

**Tracking the official response to graffiti in New York City**

This study is part of a larger ethnographic analysis that explores the subculture of graffiti writing and the official reaction to graffiti in New York City since the late 1980s. Over the course of the 1990s, New York City’s graffiti writing subculture experienced a period of diversification and splintering as many of its members pursued legal and commercial avenues through which to pursue their craft. In conjunction with this growing complexity, evidence suggests that many contemporary graffiti writers lead conventional lives and subscribe to conventional values. Having explored, through in-depth interviews and 6 years of observation, these aspects of graffiti writing culture elsewhere (Kramer 2010), in what follows I focus on the official reaction to graffiti in New York City. I do this by consulting newspaper articles from the *New York Times*, the *Daily News*, and other print media, such as *The Village Voice*; press releases of the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations; and political memos and internal reports from the Giuliani administration.

Articles from the *New York Times* and *Daily News* were retrieved from Lexis-Nexis. Using the term “graffiti,” I conducted “full text” searches for each individual year covered by this study. However, in the case of the *Daily News* I could only search from 1995 onwards. The articles were then perused and, if deemed to be of some relevance, printed. With much of the “noise” being a product of references to the film *American Graffiti* or the Palm OS “Graffiti” technology, determining the relevance of any given article was a relatively straightforward procedure. In cases of uncertainty, the article was printed and retained. Newspaper articles from other sources, such as *The New York Post* and *The Village Voice*, were discovered in a vertical file at the Municipal Archives of City Hall and through reading alternative media. These articles were used to supplement the larger body of articles from the *New York Times* and *Daily News*.

Most of the documents from the Giuliani administration were retrieved from the City Hall library in New York City. This would not have been possible without the help of the library staff who provided the information required to locate relevant documents. These included Giuliani’s press releases, internal memos, and figures and literature associated with anti-graffiti initiatives. The press releases of the Bloomberg administration were found online (www.nyc.gov). Like the newspaper articles, I read through Bloomberg’s press releases and printed those that were seen as relevant to the topic at hand. The New York City government website also has a search engine which enables one to find many other documents related to graffiti, such as those made available by the NYPD and other city agencies.
I then created five files and arranged each file in chronological order. The five files were titled: “The New York Times” (approximately 800 articles); “The Daily News” (approximately 300 articles); “Other Print Media” (50 articles); “Giuliani Files” (210 pages); and “Bloomberg Files” (230 pages). Taken together, these files contained somewhere in the vicinity of 1,500 articles or well over 3,000 pages of material.

Assuming that a relatively large volume of material such as this would need to be read several times, I decided to approach my documents with general questions before moving on to more specific ones. Initial questions, such as “what is this article about?” or “what is being reported in this article?” were intended to remove preconceptions and expectations, and more importantly, to let the documents speak for themselves. Asking broad questions allowed for the identification of recurrent themes and patterns. For example, reports often focused on “subway graffiti,” “anti-graffiti legislation,” “graffiti removal,” and “graffiti as ‘broken window.’” In other words, the categorization of articles, or the imposing of borders on an otherwise amorphous mass of data, was developed “from the ground up,” so to speak.

With these themes as headings, I created an index that listed each article by its title and date of appearance. Having such an index not only provided an accessible overview of what was contained in my sources, but also made visible which themes recurred with greater and lesser frequency within the discourse on graffiti. The majority of the documents I had gathered contained sentiments and recorded official activity that displayed a clear opposition to graffiti. Amongst documents from the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations, there was not a single example that did not denounce graffiti.

This observation raised two further and more specific questions. First, how can the official response to graffiti be described? Second, how can this official response be interpreted? In order to answer these questions, I isolated and re-read the documents that recorded official responses to graffiti. In this phase of the analysis, I focused on the type of language that was used to describe graffiti writers and the opposition to graffiti; whether it was significant and, if so, how or why? I also attempted to map how the city’s anti-graffiti policies and activities were proliferating and changing over time. The next step involved identifying elective affinities (Weber 1979) between the contents of my sources and sociological concepts that could demystify what I was encountering. Each time I thought I had discovered answers to the more specific questions posed, I went back over the documents to assess their plausibility. This process occurred several times before I settled on the results offered in what follows.

**Conceptualizing the official response to graffiti**

The city’s response to graffiti can be understood as a moral panic, which can be said to occur when the reaction to a pattern of behavior that is seen as violating accepted norms or laws is disproportional to the threat posed by the behavior in question. To put it as crudely as possible, it is an “over-reaction.” Two previous studies have assumed that the concept could be meaningfully applied in analyzing responses to graffiti writing. The first, conducted by Ferrell (1996), was based on graffiti writing in Denver, Colorado and argued that city opposition to the practice was grounded in the need to reinforce public acceptance of the rights of the state to exercise authority over its subjects. The second was conducted by Austin (2001) and was based on graffiti writing in New York City throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Roughly following a Marxist approach to panics, Austin argued that official opposition to graffiti occurred in order to deflect attention and criticism away from capitalism during a period of crisis. These studies are grounded in times and, at least in
Ferrell’s case, also spaces, that differ from the present study. As such it would be inappropriate to simply assume on their basis that a moral panic over graffiti writing constitutes a part of New York City’s contemporary past and present. Rather, this is something that needs to be shown.

The concept of moral panic was initially elaborated by Stanley Cohen (1972), who traced the idea through an institutional analysis. Central to his analysis were the role played by the mass media and institutions devoted to social control, most notably the police, courts, and politicians or legislators. In relation to the mass media, Cohen suggested that we know we have a panic on our hands when reports exaggerate and distort the importance of events and social phenomenon. The inflated seriousness of events will lead to predictions of impending doom unless something is done about the problem (Cohen 1972, pp. 144–148). Insofar as action is dependent upon an object, the media will also create “folk devils” through the use of metaphor and symbolization (1972, p. 40).

Within formal agencies of social control, three processes will be noticeable. First, an increasing number of agencies will become involved with, or respond to, the problem. These agencies will also intensify their efforts and seek out new methods to curtail the “threat” (Cohen 1972, pp. 86–87). Thus, we may see new applications of technology, politicians calling for harsher penalties, the introduction of bills and new pieces of legislation (1972, p. 133). Alongside formal activity, we will notice an increase in public concern, which may take a variety of forms, such as letters to the editor. Alternatively, action groups led by Becker’s (1963, p. 147) “moral entrepreneurs” will develop and engage in a variety of activities ranging from the implementation of practical solutions at the local level to lobbying politicians to “do something.”

Since Cohen, analysts such as Jones et al. (1989), Davis and Stasz (1990), and Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994), have attempted to formulate abstract theoretical criteria capable of determining the presence (or absence) of a panic. That is, they have sought to identify the “symptoms” of a moral panic insofar as they exist independently of specific institutional contexts. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) offer the most concise and systematic formulation along these lines. They offer four indicators—concern, consensus, hostility and disproportionality—that are of central importance in the present context and can be used to structure the official response to graffiti in New York City.

Concern and consensus

The first indicator, concern, implies that the behavior of a certain group of people, and the consequences of that behavior, will create a heightened level of anxiety. This can be measured through opinion polls, or witnessed in increases in public commentary, legislation proposals, and activity within institutions devoted to controlling society’s members.

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2 Hall et al. (1978, pp. 223–227; 1976, pp. 75–79) have helped to clarify these aspects of a moral panic by speaking of signification spirals, which rely on the three interrelated processes of convergence, thresholds and escalation. Convergence is relatively straightforward and involves the drawing of parallels between distinct activities. Hall et al. point out that the meaning of any given convergence is always crystallized against a backdrop of thresholds of social tolerance ranging from the “permissive” to the “extremely violent.” For example, erroneously linking “student political protest” to “hooliganism” or “violence” pushes a legitimate activity (political protest) into the realm of criminality (violence), thereby making it appear “unacceptable.” Convergence and the use of thresholds combine to escalate the sense of threat that an otherwise relatively benign practice poses to society. Having made a practice appear more threatening or criminal than it actually is, escalation creates for agents of social control the legitimacy presupposed in the exercise of repressive measures. See also Thompson (1998) for the significance of signification spirals.

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The amount of public commentary on graffiti writing in New York City suggests that the first of Goode and Ben-Yehuda’s requirements is satisfied. Since 1990, the *New York Times* alone has published on average approximately 250 articles a year in which “graffiti” appears. Of these, about one fifth are directly concerned with graffiti writing culture. The figures for the *Daily News*, a publication of lesser density and relatively minor circulation, are about half those of the *New York Times*. These articles range from editorials and letters to the editor to more sustained pieces of journalism. While media reporting occurs in a fairly regular manner, it is also the case that graffiti related events tend to trigger spikes in such reporting. At the level of city politics, every political regime since 1990—Dinkins, Giuliani and Bloomberg—has passed into legislation new laws that seek to prevent graffiti. For example, in 1992, the Dinkins administration banned the sale of spray paint to those below the age of 18 (Associated Press 1992); in 1995, Giuliani created an Anti-Graffiti Task Force comprised of 16 city agencies (Giuliani Press Release 1995c); and, more recently, Bloomberg raised the “legal” spray painting age to 21 and created a law which forces property owners to remove illegal graffiti from their properties (Bloomberg Press Release 2005b).

Consensus suggests that a relatively broad cross-section of a community agrees that a problem exists and constitutes a threat of some sort. However, Goode and Ben-Yehuda are not claiming that one can posit the existence of a point beyond which we can say a panic has begun. Rather, this criterion helps us ascertain the size of any given moral panic and rule out phenomena that may otherwise appear as a panic. As they put it

At no exact point are we able to say that a panic exists; however, if the number is insubstantial, clearly, one does not. (1994, p. 34)

Given the spectrum of anti-graffiti activity just noted, it seems safe to infer that some sections of the community perceive graffiti as a problem. However, it is important to point out that there is reason to suspect that whatever consensus does exist is, at least in part, a creation of city leaders and the agencies they oversee. The tendency among city leaders to create and shape public perception is most evident during the anti-graffiti campaigns that they orchestrate. These campaigns rarely fail to include an “educational” component in which the city acknowledges a need to teach “the public about the negative impacts of graffiti” (Giuliani Brochure 1996). The assumption here is that without the education provided by the city the public would not necessarily see graffiti as a “problem.”

**Hostility**

The third criterion suggests that hostility towards the troubling behavior will be openly expressed. Hostility may appear in several ways. As suggested by Cohen’s (1972) analysis,

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3 For example, in the late summer of 2005, Marc Ecko, a fashion designer known for embracing the aesthetics associated with graffiti writing culture, acquired permission from community leaders in Chelsea, Manhattan, to host a daylong public event. Featuring mock subway cars as canvasses to be painted during the day, the purpose of the event was to showcase the talents of approximately 20 renowned graffiti artists from New York City. A spike in media reporting accompanied this incident, especially in light of the fact that the city tried to have Ecko’s permit for the event rescinded. In turn, Ecko, citing First Amendment rights, successfully defeated the city in court.

4 The decision to penalize property owners should also be understood as an example of the extension of hostility towards those who do not write graffiti but have come to be seen as somehow responsible for its presence. Along with Mayor Giuliani’s policing of store owners who sell spray paint, I have discussed Mayor Bloomberg’s attempt to punish property owners who fail to remove graffiti from their property in detail elsewhere (Kramer 2009).
we may see specific social groups symbolically constructed as “folk devils” that, if left unchecked, embody a real danger to society. Furthermore, folk devils that end up caught in the legal machinery of society may find themselves on the receiving end of excessively harsh penal sentences. Finally, an “us” and “them” mentality will take hold and a variety of strategies will be developed to eradicate the “threat.”

A great degree of hostility, expressed in discursive and material forms, is directed towards those who write graffiti in the public spaces of New York City. In fact, hostility is so extensive and multifaceted that it would not be an exaggeration to say that mapping it in detail could easily fill several chapters. Over the last 15 or so years, graffiti writers have been portrayed as “uncivil” (Grimes 1993; Gross 1994; Kristof 1996; Muschamp 1993); as a “highly organized graffiti underground” akin to the Mafia (Kappstatter 1998); as gangs and violent criminals (Ayres 1994; Hanley 1995; Olmeda 1995; Terry 2000); as rats (Quintanilla 1995); and, on one occasion, as “termites” that need to be “exterminated” (Lemire 2003).

Alongside representations such as these, one discovers a protracted search for technological solutions to the graffiti problem. Inventors and scientists have worked to produce a variety of graffiti removal solutions and preventative coatings. Some of these efforts seem reasonable; others verge on the slightly absurd. For example, in 1996 city authorities considered the possibility of using a laser beam to remove graffiti. The laser beam in question was initially developed by the military for the purpose of shooting down enemy missiles (Browne 1996). In 1997, the MTA consulted NASA for advice on developing a “weapon” capable of concealing scratches made in glass (Rutenberg 1997). Other agencies of social control have developed an interest in the possibilities created by advances in technology as well. The NYPD now make use of technologies developed by the military to catch graffiti writers. These include, but are by no means limited to, the use of night vision goggles and telescopes (Bennet 1992; Hernandez 1993; James 1992); long-range video and audio equipment (Krauss 1996); and infra-red/thermal imaging cameras (Donohue 2001; Rutenberg 2005). Finally, the graffiti writers who do get caught are not unlikely to find themselves receiving relatively severe penalties. Not only are the fines imposed for graffiti writing on the increase, but judges and other relevant authorities are more prepared to sentence graffiti writers to prison (Gardiner 2007).

Disproportionality

According to Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994, p. 38) the concept of moral panic rests on disproportionality. Interestingly, there are several ways to establish disproportion.5 More

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5 It is worth pointing out that Goode and Ben-Yehuda provide a detailed account of four measures that, if either is satisfied, determine disproportionality. The first and second measures are “exaggerated figures” and “fabricated figures.” Whereas the former measure refers to exaggerating the scope of a problem, either in terms of the number of people involved in the troubling activity or the harm it causes, the latter measure assesses the extent to which the figures used to support a moral panic are actually based on empirical research. The other two measures are relational. On the one hand, we need to test for the “over-representation” of an issue. In such cases, an issue will become the subject of intense debate while another issue that is of far more significance by empirically verifiable standards will be neglected. On the other hand, we may test for changes over time in the ways in which an issue is debated. For example, where an activity remains consistent but public interest in the activity intensifies and wanes over time, that is, when concern over a certain behavior is incongruent with actual patterns in behavior, the criterion of disproportionality has been met. As will become clear, I am establishing disproportion primarily in the first sense identified. That is, the response to graffiti constitutes a disproportionate reaction insofar as the empirical evidence concerning the harm caused by graffiti has been, to put it politely in my view, exaggerated.
often than not analysts attempt to show a disjuncture between the intensity of the societal response to an activity and the actual rate of that activity. However, given that the official reaction to graffiti is based on ideas concerning the social and economic ramifications of graffiti, it is necessary to employ an alternative understanding of disproportion. In the present case, disproportionality can be said to exist when the (official) response to an activity is excessive in light of available empirical evidence concerning the objective harm caused by that activity.

In this sense, disproportionality comes to hinge on the plausibility of the “broken windows” thesis, which could be said to constitute the core of anti-graffiti rhetoric. While the thesis emerged towards the end of the 1970s, its first academic articulation came in 1982 (Wilson and Kelling 1982). Simply stated, the broken windows thesis asserts that minor forms of disorder, such as graffiti writing, will invite serious acts of law breaking if left unchecked. Since Wilson and Kelling’s formulation the notion has acquired economic and social significance. To them, broken windows are powerful enough to generate “disorder,” destroying the economic and social stability of the areas in which they appear. That is, the thesis asserts that the presence or absence of graffiti determines the economic, social, and cultural wellbeing of a neighborhood or city. In this context, by inviting and maintaining the presence of business communities, promoting tourism, and fighting crime, combating graffiti will improve the city to the advantage of all residents. This thesis, or a variation of it, has been re-stated by political elites (and within the mass print media) ad nauseam. On occasion, government publications have simply assumed the empirical validity of broken windows (see, for example, Russel et al. 2002).

The broken windows thesis provides much of the epistemic foundation for the anti-graffiti efforts orchestrated by officials in New York City. Yet, it is clear that the thesis remains surrounded by uncertainty. This claim finds strong support in the contradictions that lie at the heart of political rhetoric on graffiti writing. While the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations have done a remarkable job of producing and reinforcing a body of knowledge on the economic and social significance of graffiti in the public square—a body of knowledge which would have us believe that graffiti corrodes the tourism industry and compels businesses to relocate to other cities/regions where there is less graffiti (Giuliani 1996)—many other moments within the political discourse of the city suggest that the relationship between graffiti and the disintegration of fundamental economic and social systems is difficult to accept as a fact.

While graffiti remains a common visual feature in many parts of the city, tourism and business are booming. In fact, New York City has been awarded a variety of tourism awards in recent years prompting Bloomberg to say

I want to thank Travel and Leisure for this prestigious award, which reaffirms what we all know to be true—that New York City is open for business and ready to welcome the world’s travelers. (Bloomberg Press Release 2002; see also Bloomberg Press Release 2004b)

Moreover, given that not even events as horrific as 9/11 seem to have had much impact on business practices in New York City, the alleged relationship between graffiti and the decline of the business community appears tenuous at best. As Bloomberg has pointed out:

No major company has headed out of town. In fact, many are coming in the opposite direction….During 2002, we reclaimed Manhattan….Far faster than anyone thought possible, we brought the hum of commerce back to our historic birthplace. (Bloomberg Press Release 2003a; see also Bloomberg State of the City Address 2004a)
What public disclosures such as this suggest is that graffiti writing leads something of an independent existence and has little bearing upon broader economic and social trends.

But it is not only contradictions within political rhetoric that suggest the broken windows thesis amounts to less than an accurate reflection of empirical conditions. Social scientists working from within a variety of perspectives have also undermined the thesis. Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) emphasize the importance “collective efficacy” for reducing crime. With the concept of collective efficacy, they suggest that to the extent a community works together to solve problems, they develop a sense of cohesiveness, and it is this that provides a defense against criminal activity. From this perspective, there may be a relationship between graffiti writing and serious crime, but not in the way the broken windows thesis asserts. Rather than the presence or absence of graffiti being determinative, it is the bonds that a community forms whilst working together to remove graffiti that are of importance. Harcourt and Ludwig (2006) have provided compelling statistical analyses that suggest different variables, such as fluctuations in crack markets and broader economic trends, are better able to account for the changes in rates of serious crime that many major US cities saw throughout the 1990s. More recently, Snyder (2009) has offered comparisons of neighborhoods with more and less graffiti and crime rates. He finds neighborhoods with substantial amounts of graffiti yet low crime rates, and neighborhoods with very little graffiti and high crime rates. On this basis, he argues that graffiti is capable of creating “cool spaces” that may resonate well with commercial interests.

To add further weight to this critical work, it may be worthwhile to point out that James Q. Wilson—a co-author of broken windows—has openly acknowledged that the thesis was not based on any empirical data. In other words, while “God knows what the truth is” (James Q. Wilson, quoted in Patricia Cohen 2000), amongst us mere mortals the theory remains a “speculation” (Hurley 2004).

It would seem, then, that the criterion of disproportionality is satisfied, and that it is well within reason to say that the kind of empirical evidence that would be required to justify the hostility displayed towards graffiti writing previously noted is absent. In this light, the official reaction to graffiti can be seen as “excessive.”

Towards an urban view of moral panics

I want to work towards developing an urban view of moral panics by linking the panic over graffiti to two closely related concepts that are central to the field of urban sociology: “privatism” and “growth machines.” Privatism is a perspective, a particular way of imagining the consequences that proceed from the partnerships that often form between landed capitalists and political elites, that has been advocated by Peterson (1981) but more appropriately denounced by urban sociologists (Squires 1996; Logan and Molotch 1987) as an ideology. Importantly, understanding privatism as an ideology implies that it is not an autonomous discourse, but is intimately tied to a set of material practices. According to Logan and Molotch (1987), the material counterpart to the ideology of privatism is what they refer to as the “growth machine.” Growth machines are loose coalitions that form between a variety of interests, such as local political elites, landowners, corporate developers and speculators. What unites these diverse actors is an interest in extracting the maximum profit possible from how land is put to use (“exchange-value”), as opposed to using land for the satisfaction of relatively modest needs (“use-value”). In this view, the ideology of privatism constitutes the pretense that essentially facilitates the functioning and operation of the growth machine.
For the purpose of comparison, the “ideology of privatism” may be understood as an interrelated series of statements that seeks to consecrate the following notions: when the public sector facilitates the flow of private capital by offering businesses tax incentives, providing them with the necessary infrastructure and so on, a better economic climate is created. This climate, however, does not only benefit business communities. By inviting businesses to the city, jobs are created and this increases the tax base. With a greater pool of wealth, material gains will eventually “trickle-down” and all of the city’s residents will benefit. (cf. Logan and Molotch 1987; and Squires 1996).

The most important—and most obvious—feature of privatism is its evocation of what one might be inclined to call a causal logic. Insofar as this is the case, privatism posits an “independent variable” and “dependent variables.” Whereas public-private partnerships (in which the public assists the private) are postulated as the independent variable, the presence of stable business communities (which ensure jobs, tax revenue, and so on) and better living conditions for city residents figure as dependent variables.

Like privatism, anti-graffiti rhetoric claims that business communities and living conditions (most commonly expressed in terms of “quality of life”) are dependent variables. However, anti-graffiti rhetoric offers a variation of privatism insofar as it posits a new independent variable. More specifically, instead of emphasizing public-private partnerships, anti-graffiti rhetoric claims that graffiti is determinative. As an independent variable, graffiti may be present or absent. According to officials, where graffiti is present, business and “quality of life” are adversely affected:

[Graffiti] hurts business because it turns the street into a frightening place. (Probation Commissioner Raul Russi, quoted in Bertrand 1997)

The consequences of graffiti include businesses relocating to other cities or states and tourists foregoing trips to NYC. When this occurs, New Yorkers lose jobs and economic opportunities, and the city loses revenue. (Giuliani Brochure 1996)

The graffiti affects everyone’s quality of life. It’s ugly and it brings down property values. (Coordinator of the 106th police precinct Sal Petrozzino, quoted in Lemire 2002)

Graffiti poses a direct threat to the quality of life of all New Yorkers. (Mayor Bloomberg, quoted in Saul 2002)

These quotes reveal that anti-graffiti rhetoric posits a relationship between graffiti and business and quality of life in which the presence of the former has negative repercussions for the latter. Yet, insofar as the establishment of an elective affinity with the ideology of privatism is concerned, showing that anti-graffiti rhetoric holds the obverse to be as true is arguably of greater importance. That is, what needs to be shown is that anti-graffiti rhetoric posits a relationship between the absence of graffiti and the presence of vibrant business communities and higher quality of life for city residents. I had little difficulty locating the promotion of such ideas in my sources. Concerning the relationship between the absence of graffiti and the fostering of stable business communities, the following quotes are indicative

Last July, we launched a citywide campaign to cleanup graffiti….Not only does that keep New Yorkers safe; it also helps sustain neighborhoods where people want to live and businesses want to locate and invest. (Bloomberg Public Address 2003e)

[W]e’ll keep the walls graffiti free and invest in beautification projects so that Queens Plaza is inviting to businesses and has a high quality of life for those who live and work here. (Bloomberg Press Release 2003b)
Graffiti hurts neighborhoods both aesthetically and economically. To boost New York City’s economy and create jobs, it’s critical to create neighborhoods where people want to live and businesses want to locate and invest. (Economic Development Corporation President Andrew Alper; see Bloomberg Press Release 2003d)

Finally, the following quotes reveal that anti-graffiti rhetoric claims that the absence of graffiti benefits all of the city’s residents:

Not only are we cleaning graffiti, we also send a message to people around the city that our neighborhood is a great place to live and raise a family. (City Councilmember Eric Gioia, quoted in Yaniv 2005)

We are making great strides in the fight against graffiti and its insidious effects on our quality of life. (Mayor Bloomberg, quoted in Bertrand 2003)

Cleaner walls, streets and sidewalks makes for better community spirit and economic health. (City Councilmember John Liu, quoted in Lemire 2003)

These [anti-graffiti] initiatives not only improve the quality of life for New Yorkers, but show visitors that New York is a clean, responsible, vibrant city. (Giuliani Press Release 1995b)

The elective affinity between anti-graffiti rhetoric and the ideology of privatism is transparent to the point where it hardly calls for further comment. It is, however, worth noting that statements like the ones (re)presented above are far from difficult to find. Rather, they are repeated by public officials with a degree of regularity such that it would be more than fair to say that what we see in anti-graffiti discourse is a constant redeployment of a few major “sound bites.” Coterminous with this repetition, the opposition to graffiti is expressed in syntactic structures noteworthy for their simplicity, declarative tone, and almost perfect lucidity.

From the ideological to the material

Of course, decoding privatism for its ideological bearings suggests that we are not in the presence of a free-floating discourse. As noted previously, the material counterpart to the ideology of privatism is the growth machine (Logan and Molotch 1987). It is worth drawing attention, albeit briefly, to some of the social consequences associated with growth machines. Previous research indicates that in cities where growth machines work towards the over-development of land, thereby inflating property values, those who are most disadvantaged include small property owners and renters (Zukin 1991); small business owners (Logan and Molotch 1987); low-income households (Massey and Denton 1993); and those who live around or below the poverty line (Smith 1996).

Neil Smith (1996) and Mike Davis (1990, 2002) have pushed this line of analysis even further and suggested that as over-development generates areas of concentrated privilege, the need to defend such enclaves also arises. On the one hand, many people will be displaced by rising rents and find other locations in which to live and work. On the other, some will stay and come to be perceived as a threat. This perception often translates into an over-policing of certain neighborhoods, the militarization of public space, and draconian uses of the law (see also Parenti 1999; Castells 1983). This suggests that where the economic strategies of growth machines meet their limitations, public officials will deploy agencies of social control and resort to the use of force.
Many of the discoveries made by these and other urban sociologists are reflected in my empirical sources. That the Giuliani and Bloomberg administrations, like most city level political administrations, have often worked in collaboration with the private sector in determining the ways in which urban spaces will be put to use is no secret. Of course, these partnerships are often accompanied by a discourse which seeks to bestow upon them legitimacy by claiming that when the public and private sectors work together “all New Yorkers benefit” (Giuliani Press Release 1995a; 1995d; 1995e; Bloomberg Press Release 2003a; Bloomberg Open Letter 2003c). However, in accordance with the critical analyses of urban sociologists, it becomes very difficult to accept as plausible the notion that all New Yorkers benefit from the arrangement between pro-growth and force when, almost within the same breath, Bloomberg can state with some exuberance that

residential property values have appreciated by more than 80% over the last 4 years. (Bloomberg Press Release 2005a)

And,

the percentage of [misdemeanor] defendants receiving jail sentences has increased 48%, with sentences of more than 30 days increasing 74%. (Bloomberg Press Release 2004c)

If subsequent statements are anything to go by, it is clear that this trend of imprisoning misdemeanor offenders displays no sign of abating. Within less than a year of the previous communiqué, the progress being made concerning higher rates of imprisonment was noted:

the percentage of cases resulting in jail time has increased from 45% to 67%. (Bloomberg Press Release 2005a)

This would seem to suggest that when growth machines dominate the decision making processes that ultimately determine the uses to which urban land will be put, not all New Yorkers will benefit. As urban environments are re-created through these processes, from which some people do stand to gain, many are displaced or, even worse, become entangled with the city’s carceral complex. For anybody who is familiar with New York City, or has witnessed the changing social composition of neighborhoods such as Williamsburg, Brooklyn, over the last 15 or so years, and, more recently, neighborhoods such as Bushwick, Brooklyn, the way in which space can be rapidly created anew will seem fairly obvious (on the gentrification of Williamsburg, see Schlichtman and Patch 2008).

What may be less obvious are the mechanisms that make such changes possible. I have suggested that there is no relationship between graffiti and “disorder,” or the economic and social vitality of a city. Instead of emphasizing visual factors, I suggested that a city’s fundamental social and economic structures are more likely to be determined by growth machines, which seek public approval and legitimacy through ideological means. Growth machines pursue “exchange-value” from land and in doing so generally fail to take into consideration the material well-being of many members of a community. As property values increase, the working classes and other socially marginal groups are ultimately priced out of the city and displaced in one way or another.

I suggest that we interpret the moral panic over graffiti writing in New York City as a variation on the ideology of privatism (Squires 1996) that ultimately serves the interests of growth machines. What distinguishes anti-graffiti rhetoric from the ideology of privatism is the ability of the former to effectively camouflage the latter. Thus, while both discourses evoke a causal relationship in which the dependent variables include the city’s economy, social composition, and the well being of all New Yorkers, the discourses posit very
different independent variables. Whereas the ideology of privatism posits public-private partnerships as the independent variable, anti-graffiti rhetoric claims that the presence or absence of graffiti is determinative. If the presence of graffiti causes economic and social collapse, its absence strengthens the economy to the advantage of all. Of course, the absence of graffiti is only possible through tougher penal policy and new anti-crime initiatives. For obvious reasons, this is a much more palatable version of privatism. To elaborate, anti-graffiti rhetoric is very effective in generating widespread public support for growth machines by linking efforts at crime reduction to the economic and social order of things. This rhetorical trope operates on the assumption, arguably correct, that people are more likely to support anti-crime initiatives than what may appear to be the public subsidization of private (or “big”) business.

It is important to note that this is not to claim that the consciousness of the masses is somehow “false” or that they are the victims of ideology. The reduction of crime is, after all, a rational concern. It would therefore be more accurate to suggest that the ingenuity of the panic over graffiti lies in its ability to exploit the gap between interests that are not necessarily mutually inclusive. Thus, while marginal social groups are invited to support efforts that ostensibly will increase their personal safety, they simultaneously support a growth machine that betrays their interest in remaining a part of the community which accompanies living in the city.

Conclusion

I have tried to draw a link between the social contradictions that accompany the production of urban space and moral panics. Having shown that the official reaction to graffiti constitutes a panic, I found that it contained several points of contact with the concepts of privatism and growth machines. These concepts have been central to urban sociologists interested in understanding how public space comes to assume its particular cultural, social, and economic form. As noted, the ideology of privatism is often acknowledged—for lack of a better term—as the “cultural grease” that ensures the smooth functioning of growth machines. Growth machines, at the expense of those who would use land for the satisfaction of relatively modest needs (Zukin 1991; Massey and Denton 1993; Smith 1996; Davis 1990), seek to extract the maximum profit possible from the buying, selling and renting of land.

Given that the moral panic over graffiti contains a rhetoric that bears an uncanny resemblance to an ideology that is central to negotiating social contradictions that accompany how space will be put to use, it is reasonable to conclude that the panic in question ultimately serves the interests of the city’s growth machines. While it might seem to be the case that the ideological shift from privatism to broken windows and/or anti-graffiti rhetoric is trivial, I would suggest otherwise. Broken windows and anti-graffiti rhetoric are politically popular frameworks insofar as they offer elites a powerful device that generates widespread public support for a set of economic pursuits that do not necessarily improve the lives of that very public.

This research also shows the significant role that interpretive analysis can play in getting beneath the surface of appearances. In this case, what we see is that the moral panic over graffiti cannot be reduced to a simple conflict between the city and graffiti. There is a much deeper and much more profound social antagonism at work here, one that is of great sociological importance. This antagonism concerns the city’s power elite insofar as they have vested interests in extracting profit from urban land use, and the city’s marginalized social groups broadly conceived.
Of course, while this insight provides an interesting theoretical frame, it would be worthwhile for future research to move in several directions. Most importantly, subsequent research could seek to lend further empirical weight to the propositions suggested here by exploring official reactions to graffiti and the actual behavior of growth machines. Research along these lines could begin by identifying neighborhoods that have been subjected to anti-graffiti initiatives (Bushwick and Harlem come to mind) and exploring the subsequent behavior of growth machines. Along these lines, one could conduct interviews with those in the real estate industry in an effort to discern how they make decisions concerning urban investment. It may also be fruitful to gather data on public investments in infrastructure; shifts in the types and amount of businesses in an area; shifts in average rents; and changes in the socio-economic composition of neighborhoods in order to see if such trends are accompanied by aesthetic efforts to improve urban areas.

To the degree that such research verifies the need to bear in mind the possibility that panics may be a function of the social tensions embedded in the production of (urban) space, one could move on to a consideration of the extent to which this urban approach can help account for over-reactions to a wider variety of public behaviors and practices.

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